Approaches

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The Study of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa

The academic study of Islam and of Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa has developed during the past thirty years more as part of African studies than of Islamic studies. Islamic studies in Africa has therefore not been so deeply influenced by the orientalist heritage of Western scholarship that prevailed among those who studied Islam in the central Muslim regions. On the other hand, the global resurgence of Islam that has taken place during the same period, in all its social, political, religious and indeed academic forms, has had a profound influence on African Islamic studies.

In the 1960s, some scholars were confidently predicting that the political role of religion, and specifically of Islam, would shrink under the growing dominance of secularist political ideologies. Quite the contrary, however, has occurred. Throughout Africa, the religious is inextricably entwined with the political, often to the extent that it is virtually impossible to disentangle the two strands, even for analytical purposes. International politics have reflected a similar trend. Political developments in the Middle East since the 1960s, the economics of the oil boom in the 1970s, and the widespread political ramifications of the Muslim Revolution in Iran in 1979, have all contributed to giving 'Islam' a salience in the consciousness of non-Muslim Westerners that is probably unparalleled since the days of the crusades!

What Samuel B. Huntington describes as a 'clash of civilizations' certainly resonates of a contemporary replay of medieval Christian-Muslim confrontation. These developments have profoundly affected the academic study of Islam and of Muslim societies in numerous ways, not least in the amount of money that is being attracted to support such research and most notably in the recent appearance of numerous new centres of Islamic studies in academic establishments in Europe and the United States. A pertinent example of this process is the recent establishment of the ISIM, which publishes this Newsletter. Nonetheless, the explosion in Islamic studies in African countries with sizeable Muslim populations has been much more spectacular than in Europe or America.

Islamism and Islamic research in Africa

Elizabeth Hodgkin's article published in 1990, entitled 'Islamism and Islamic Research in Africa',[1] remains the most inclusive and systematic treatment of these trends in print, despite its somewhat limited geographical scope, focusing primarily on Sudan, Nigeria and Senegal. The article traces both institutional profiles as well as the ideological tensions in Islamic studies in Africa. As the title of her article suggests, Hodgkin's concern was primarily to explore Islamist trends in Africa and their impact on research and on the university environment. Her analytical point of departure was to distinguish Muslim 'modernists' (whom she defined as those who wish to modernize Islam) from the Islamists who seek to 'Islamize' modernity, and in particular in the university context, to Islamize contemporary knowledge. The thrust of her article was to highlight the many contradictions that this situation has produced, primarily amongst Islamists themselves. For example, she argued that Islamist scholars fell into two categories on the basis of academic background: those who had received Western-style disciplinary training and those who had received Arabist and Islamic studies training. In addition to the fact that these two groups tend to produce very different kinds of publications, Hodgkin noted that many Western trained Islamist scholars seemed to know relatively little about Islam, whereas the Islamically-trained scholars tended to write uncritically in highly normative terms.

Indeed, it is this uncritical and idealized presentation of Islam that causes concern amongst most non-Muslim, Western trained scholars who tend to dismiss this kind of writing as non-academic and to ignore it, or perhaps to try to turn it into an object of research. However, it is my view that this kind of writing is reflective of a much more complex and significant process which is taking place in the development of Islamic studies: the emergence of a Muslim African voice in academia. One of the most significant results of this change is that non-Muslim scholars no longer enjoy a monopoly in the field and must learn to engage with this new voice. The process can be painful for us non-Muslims, less, I think, because of the analytical or critical issues involved than because of the fact that the 'object' of our research is no longer silent.

The emergence of a Muslim voice in African Islamic studies is largely a postcolonial phenomenon, but then, so is African Islamic studies itself. Certainly, my own work has always been subject to criticism from an 'Islamic' perspective, from my earliest publications based on my PhD research in northern Nigeria in the mid-1960s,[2] to more recent research in Mali. The publication of a small collective book on Muslim schooling, co-edited with a Muslim Malian colleague, was greeted with considerable anger by one or two Malians.[3] The anger was focused precisely on the fact that certain contributors to the book took a critical view of various issues that in turn resulted in an accusation that the book was 'against Islam'. The person who made this accusation, the director of one of Mali's more prestigious *madrasa* schools, had cooperated with me in my research on the history of the *madrasa* schools. However, he clearly expected a non-critical, normative account of Muslim schooling in Mali and was perhaps particularly upset by the fact that the one patently critical essay in the book was authored by the only contributor who had actually attended a *madrasa* school. Apparently, this process of change can be painful for everyone concerned.

The 'secularizing of Islam'?

This incident illustrates one of the most intriguing contradictions that Hodgkin notes at the end of her article, where she observes that for all its advocacy of a deeper religious life, Islamism 'may be said to be secularising Islam'.[4] This is because, in her view, those who wish to Islamize modern life must at the same time come to terms with it; such a process of change is interactive and necessarily works in both directions. Criticism of the *madrasa* schools by its own products is something that arose in this case from the actual experience of questioning the relationship of *madrasa* schooling to the social, economic and political constraints of contemporary urban life in Mali. Open critical assessment of schooling in Mali seems essential to the development of the educational sector in a country where almost 80 % of the population remains illiterate. Nor can the *madrasa*s be exempted from such criticism, even in the name of 'Islam', since they account for an important proportion of schooling provision in the country. Thus, by offering a 'modernized' and 'relevant' form of Muslim schooling, the *madrasa* constituencies necessarily draw 'Islam' into a national debate about education that is informed by predominantly secularist principles.

Even if one would not agree with Elizabeth Hodgkin that this process contributes to a secularization of Islam, the Malian example certainly illustrates the extent to which the contemporary study of Islam and of Muslim societies is a highly politicized domain. In the same way that the *madrasa*s cannot exempt themselves from criticism as a part of the educational sector, scholars who engage in research on the *madrasa*s cannot expect that their findings will be exempt from critical response from those who have invested their lives in *madrasa* schooling.

Another example that illustrates the kinds of tensions that affect the study of Islam in Africa can be found in research into the *jihad* of ᶜUthman dan Fodio and of the Muslim state that he established at the beginning of the 19th century in what is now northern Nigeria. In 1967, Murray Last published *The Sokoto Caliphate*, a revised version of his PhD dissertation.[5] This book is a history of the *jihad* and the administration of the Caliphate based on meticulous study of the vast Arabic documentation then available. It was the first major study of the subject which used such sources, and in many ways has remained the most authoritative, perhaps primarily because most Nigerian scholars are reticent to touch the subject due to the profound symbolic role the Caliphate continues to play in Nigerian Muslim politics. Indeed, the only extensive treatment of the *jihad* by a Nigerian is Ibraheem Sulaiman's *A Revolution in History*,[6] which was viewed by some critics more as a programmatic text for the future than a serious historical treatment of the past.

Creative tensions?

These two examples, which could be multiplied many times over, raise numerous complex questions for the scholarly community. Is critical scholarship a 'secular' phenomenon that is inherently incompatible with Muslim religious sensibilities? Or is it possible that such scholarship can better assist committed Muslims in understanding their past and present and to build their future? Can the tensions that span these two extreme positions act as a creative impetus for scholarship? One prospect for such a development is the increasing number of African Muslim scholars active in the field of Muslim studies whose work is of the highest academic standard. These include Muslim scholars – Islamist as well as 'secularist' – whose competence in their disciplines is combined with a palpable sensitivity to things Islamic. At the same time, much of the scholarship of us non-Muslims nowadays also reflects a greater empathy with Islam and Muslim societies than it did thirty years ago. And the real challenge that faces us scholars today is to nurture these seeds of sensitivity and empathy, without which no fruitful development of our field can ensue despite the money that has been flowing into all the new institutes. ✦

Notes

1. Hodgkin, Elizabeth (1990), *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, pp. 73-130.
2. Nigerian reviews of the book based on my PhD dissertation were particularly critical of my representations of Islam: Brenner, Louis (1973), *The Shehus of Kukawa: a History of the al-Kanemi Dynasty of Borno*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
3. Sanankoua, Bintou et Brenner, Louis, eds. (1991), *L'enseignement islamique au Mali*. Bamako: Editions Jamana.
4. Hodgkin, (1990), p. 105.
5. Last, Murray, (1967), *The Sokoto Caliphate*. London: Longmans.
6. Sulaiman, Ibraheem (1986), *A Revolution in History*. London: Mansell Publishing.

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